

**Early Warning, Cooperation Aid Fire Protection
Council President Scott Peters, First District
For the Carmel Valley News, October/November 2007**

The wildfires of 2007 brought unprecedented devastation to the landscape of San Diego County. However, the quick work of our public safety agencies, combined with the cooperation of residents in threatened areas, prevented widespread loss of life. My thanks go out to the thousands of residents in Carmel Valley and Pacific Highlands Ranch who heeded the early warning of fire officials. While it was not easy to leave behind your homes and belongings, your cooperation and assistance allowed fire fighters to focus their efforts on beating back the flames, which helped spare our communities from widespread damage. By avoiding the risk of last-minute evacuations and panic, our communities were largely untouched and no lives were lost.

My thanks also to the men and women of the San Diego Fire Department, as well as the dozens of other local, state and federal fire agencies, who worked around the clock to battle the intense fires and unpredictable winds which raged across the region.

The communities along the 56 corridor were designed to accommodate large swaths of open space. This proximity to trails and the untouched beauty of our natural surroundings were strong selling points for the many residents who flocked to this area. Living so close to the urban/wildland interface does pose certain risks, which is why fire prevention efforts undertaken by the City and homeowners are so vital.

In the wake of the Cedar and Paradise fires of 2003, the City of San Diego implemented a number of new regulations aimed at reducing the scope of damage from wildfires. Those include mandatory brush clearance policies for homes in close proximity to open brushy areas, and requirements for fire-resistant roofing materials in new and newly remodeled homes.

We committed the City to working to improve communications with other agencies who deal regionally with fires, including the California Department of Fire and Forestry Protection, the County Sheriff and the many local fire agencies in the County. As a result, our “interoperability,” the ability of different agencies to talk to one another, has been greatly improved.

Communication with residents has also improved since 2003. The most obvious example is the Reverse 911 system, which made thousands of calls over several days to warn residents and announce mandatory evacuations. The ability for residents to evacuate before the danger was upon them helped prevent the tragic loss of life witnessed during the Cedar fire. The countywide 211 system is another improvement, offering up-to-date information on evacuations, road closures and other information. The system was overloaded in the early days, due to intense demand. I hope county officials will improve their web capacity and number of telephone operators to reduce delays during the next emergency.

While I am pleased that these changes allowed fire units to more easily coordinate their efforts and protect homes, there are always new lessons to learn from an event of this magnitude. I hope our public safety agencies will offer honest feedback on how we can continue to improve our disaster response.